

Philosophers: Great Men?

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Marxists like to say that history is made by the masses in class struggle. It is not just made by great men such as Alexander the Great, Caesar, Napoleon Bonaparte, Shaka, or Mzilikazi, they say.

But when it comes to the history of ideas, it not immediately clear that these ideas have been developed by society, or by a few great men (with hardly a woman among them, by the way). For example, in Lenin's 1913 'Three Sources and Three Component Parts of Marxism', he mentions Hegel and Feuerbach as precursors of Marxist philosophy, and Adam Smith and David Ricardo as precursors in the field of economics.

When it comes to the third component part, socialism, Lenin names no names. But they are named in the Marx & Engels' 'Communist Manifesto' of 1848, under 'Critical-Utopian Socialism and Communism': Babeuf, Saint-Simon, Fourier, and Owen.

I will return to the question of great men at the end of this short piece. In the mean time, let us assume that these famous philosophers can stand as representatives of the various changes and improvements that have happened in the recorded past.

At the top of my list is **Homer**. Homer wrote 'The Iliad' and 'The Odyssey' in about 800 BC. I don't know if he is generally regarded as a philosopher. I include him because for our purposes it is Homer the Greek who marks the beginning of recorded history – and in particular, the history of ideas.

There are other writings of that date or even earlier. For example, Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Indian, and Chinese writing. Some of these are chronicles. Others expound ideas about the world, mostly of a religious nature, without any relation to historic events.

But with the Greeks, starting with Homer, the Gods are shown as rather frivolous. These are Gods who don't really care very much about people. The humans must be careful not to upset the Gods, but in all other respects, they must live their lives

according to their own lights, deciding for themselves what is right and wrong, without much help from the Gods.

Homer marks the beginning of literature as we know it. Homer's two books have been studied as literature from the time they were first published up until today. What we see from that time on is the development of literary dialogue between thinkers and between generations of thinkers. It is this line of dialogue between writers down the next 2,700 years of human development which eventually produces Marx and Engels in the 1840s.

Marx studied ancient history and philosophy and could read Greek and Latin easily, and did so even for pleasure. The Greeks in particular had 'opened the book' on nearly every subject under the sun. Their thinking was more or less humanistic, in other words human-centred, like Marxism is. Some of them, but not all, were thorough-going materialists, like **Democritus**. Others, like Plato, were absolute idealists.

So the split between materialists and idealists which is of such importance in Marxist thinking, was already manifest among the Greeks, and expressed in very clear terms by them.

Aristotle was a pupil of Plato's (and incidentally, the teacher of Alexander the Great, who conquered Egypt, Mesopotamia, Persia, Afghanistan, and northern India). Aristotle was systematic and scientific in the modern sense. His work is still useful today, especially in the field of the arts.

The Romans followed the Greeks in many things, but in politics they developed considerably in their own way, through their Republic, to the Roman Empire, and beyond in other forms and almost up to modern times. Rome was supposedly founded in 753 BC, and "fell" in the west (including Rome itself), in 476 AD, a period of 1229 years. But the Empire still existed in the east (Constantinople/Byzantium/Istanbul) until it was taken by the Turks in 1453, by which time the 'Renaissance' in Italy was well under way, and capitalism was on its way.

To represent Roman thought I have included three personalities from the revolutionary century which ended in the formation of the Empire from the Republic, by Octavian (Emperor Augustus), usually dated at 31 BC.

Tiberius Gracchus had been elected 'tribune of the people' in 133 BC, campaigning against unemployment and landlessness. In the struggles that followed, he was killed. In 123 BC his brother Gaius was elected, but only lasted two years until he

also was killed. These two are known as the Gracchi. Gracchus Babeuf, whose name appears later as one of the French utopian socialists, was named after them.

Cicero was another Roman of the same period (born 106, died 43 BC). He was a political and philosophical writer and orator.

The Roman Empire in the west in its later revolutionary 'decline and fall' (476 AD) moved from a slave-based economy to a feudal one. This was also the time of the rise of Christianity from a minority religion to a dominant position in Europe and North Africa. Saint Augustine, from Hippo in what is now Algeria, lived from 354 to 430 AD and wrote a great number of books, including 'City of God'.

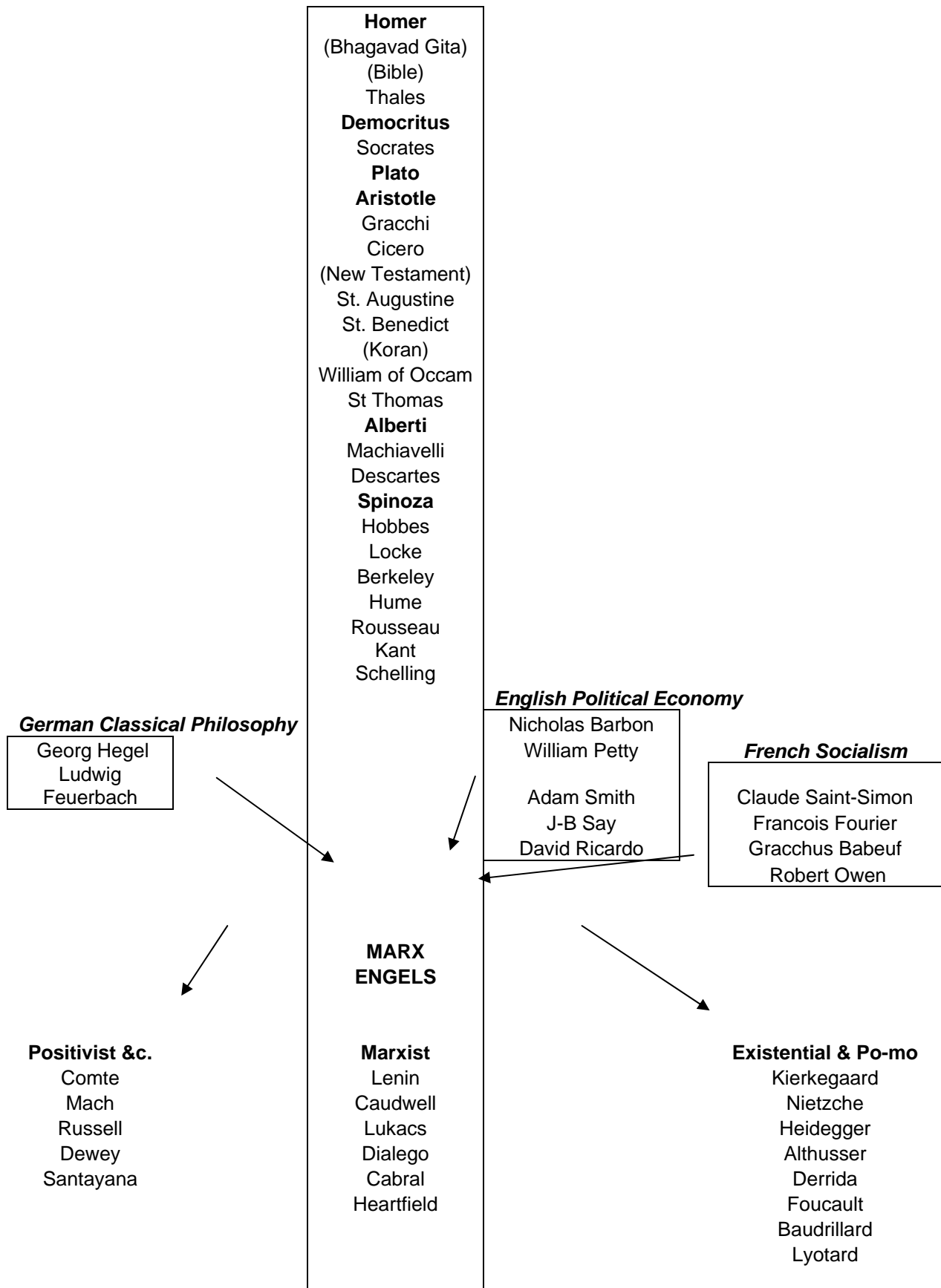
In feudalism, which is a hierarchy of lords in a pyramid, the highest terrestrial lord was supposed to be the Pope of Rome, according to Augustine. (This caused a lot of trouble about a thousand years later, during the Renaissance and Reformation in Europe. Church/State quarrels marked the beginning of the end of feudalism and the beginning of capitalist rule).

Saint Benedict (480-543) brought the monastic movement into Europe from North Africa. In my opinion the huge economic and land-holding movement of Benedictine monasteries is the precursor of the modern corporation. It provided control and a means of expansion during the thousand years of feudal domination in Western Europe. It was St. Benedict's 'Rule', a constitution for monasteries, which gave shape to this movement. (It survives today. South Africans, including Party comrades, fought in the Second World War at Monte Cassino in Italy, founded as a monastery by St. Benedict).

During the later part of the feudal period a group of philosophers existed (mostly within the holy orders of the Catholic Church) known as the scholastics, or 'schoolmen'. One of them was William of Occam, who said: 'It is idle to do with more, what can be done with less', a principle known as 'Occam's razor'. Another was St. Thomas Aquinas, who tried to prove the existence of God by the argument of 'causality'.

I have taken **Alberti** (1404-1472) as the first representative of modern humanism. He wrote about it very clearly. His writings were well known, as was his architectural work. In fact Alberti is the model of the so-called 'Renaissance Man', who was supposed to be brilliant at everything from sport to art, to war, to politics, to science. This myth about the Italian Renaissance Men is a distortion of their humanism. The real point is that they break out of the bonds of feudalism (in which each man can only follow one calling) and accept the responsibility of learning everything and working on everything.

Philosophers



This is a necessary break for capitalism to exist, and also for modern democracy to exist. **Spinoza** (1632-1677) can stand here for the necessary rational humanism that appears in northern Europe at the time of the Reformation and the establishment of the first true capitalist states there. Most historians would say that the first bourgeois state was Holland, where Spinoza spent his life.

Alberti and Spinoza are so humanist and materialist that they are almost like Marxists. The bourgeois class had to have tough philosophers like these on which to base its attack on feudalism, and to establish the science they needed in order to expand the productive forces of society.

But soon, the reactionaries and obscurantists of the bourgeois class began to undermine and cover up the message of their own philosophers. Bourgeois philosophy declined to the point of contradicting its own founders, as it still does today. In Alberti's time already there was a return to Plato's idealism. Materialists were more and more persecuted in Italy. Giordano Bruno was burnt at the stake in 1600, a martyr for humanism. Galileo Galilei was pressurised and submitted.

There was a similar reversal in northern Europe after Spinoza. This is represented in my listing by Berkeley and Rousseau, who revived idealism and mysticism. Bourgeois logic had proved to be too sharp for the bourgeois class's own good. It had to be covered up. And so we find that the philosophy of 'late capitalism' is almost the exact opposite of that of its revolutionary founders.

This typical reversal of philosophy from that of the revolutionary bourgeoisie to that of the bourgeoisie in power can even be observed in the change of mind of some of the revolutionaries of South Africa who have since become secure members of the bourgeois establishment.

This brings us to **Marx** and **Engels**, and the three sources and component parts of their philosophical, economic, and political development. The first point about this is that it is wrong and un-Marxist to suggest that Marx and Engels were somehow God-like, creating something from nothing. No - they took directly from the material at hand.

In the matter of **philosophy** it is sufficient here to mention Hegel and Feuerbach, because these are the two that are so often specifically mentioned by Marx and Engels themselves. Marx and Engels were involved with a group called the Young Hegelians in the beginning of the 1840s. The dialectical method developed by Hegel (but which has ancient origins) was taken on board by Marx and Engels at that time.

While Marx and Engels were still connected to the Young Hegelians, Ludwig Feuerbach started publishing his main books criticising Hegel from a materialist point of view, and these hit the Young Hegelians like a bombshell. Marx and Engels split from the others and synthesised **dialectical materialism**. They criticised their former associates in *The Holy Family* and *The German Ideology* as liberals.

This philosophical 'source', then, was quite immediate and personal. It involved 'polemic' with their contemporaries.

Polemic is argument, usually in writing, that directly responds to and rebuts another persons written work. It is not point-scoring. It works, and can only work, when the participants take great care not to misrepresent the opponent's argument. Marx, Engels, and Lenin were great polemicists and polemic makes up a large proportion of their work. Comrades who wish for unity with no argument must know that his sort of argument was going on from the beginning of Marxism, and is in fact the fire in which Marxism was forged and is still being forged.

Having arrived at dialectical materialism, it appeared to Marx and Engels that they must solve the unsolved riddles of **economics**, or else their philosophy would be of no use as a means of changing the world. The study of capitalist economics was relatively young, and most of its exponents were English. Nicholas Barbon was a late seventeenth-century property speculator in London, really a tycoon, and not completely respectable. He wrote one of the first books on capitalist economics, and Marx mentions him very early in *Capital*, Volume One.

William Petty (eighteenth century) is mentioned frequently by Engels. Adam Smith was a Scot, who wrote a book called *The Wealth of Nations* in the late nineteenth century, still famous in bourgeois as well as Marxist circles. David Ricardo was almost a contemporary of Marx's. He is the originator of the labour theory of value, adopted by Marx.

Jean-Baptiste Say was French, not English. But he took it upon himself to represent in France what he believed was the very latest in English political economy. He is the author of 'Say's Law', which states that supply creates its own demand. (This is like saying that water flows uphill).

Although the list of 'English' political economists is long, Marx and Engels soon found that there was more research to be done in this area than in the others (i.e. philosophy and socialist politics). Marx exhausted his life on this study, in the process writing the most famous work of Marxism, 'Capital', in which he does indeed solve the unsolved riddles of economics.

The question of **socialism** was equally in a state of uproar in Marx's early years (the 1840s), just like philosophy and economics. The French Revolution had occurred half a century earlier. The French Revolution was, and was understood to be, an event of world significance, somewhat like the Second World War is to us in our own times. It was within living memory and its effects were still playing out, and continued to do so throughout Marx and Engel's lifetime. Babeuf, Saint-Simon, and Fourier were well-known French advocates of socialism. Robert Owen was a Scot, but is always bracketed with the others.

Marx and Engels had to take on these socialists. The first major manifestation is *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Marx's 1847 polemic against the French petty-bourgeois anarchist Proudhon, followed in the next year (1848) by *The Communist Manifesto*. By this time Marx and Engels had joined an international revolutionary organisation of workers, the Communist League.

Marxist philosophy continues to be practised, in the form of scholarship, polemic, and action (in line with Marx's 11th Thesis on Feuerbach, which says that philosophers have only explained the world, but the point is to change it). Lenin took on the bourgeois philosophers in his longest book, *Materialism & Empirio-Criticism* (1908). Helena Sheehan, the Irish Marxist philosopher, wrote in 1993 that Christopher Caudwell (an English Marxist who died in the Spanish Civil War in 1937) had made a philosophical advance on Leninism.

Bourgeois philosophy retreated into weakness, wishfully called positivism, only to advance again as **post-modernism**, which is the current major philosophical opponent of Marxism-Leninism. Once again it was the French who led the charge, but in fact by now post-modernism is everywhere, reflecting the degenerate irrationalism of the last stage of capitalism, Imperialism.

Post-modernism directly attacks the rationalist, humanist roots of bourgeois history itself, rubbishing everything that modern society stands on.

The full Marxist response to post-modernism is slow in coming, but a good contribution has been made by **James Heartfield** in his book 'The "Death of the Subject" Explained'.

Great Men?

I promised to return to this question. Clearly, we have used a chronology of men and their dates. It may remind some people of the lists of names and dates of the

kings of England, or the State Presidents of South Africa, which children have sometimes been obliged to learn by heart in the past.

But I hope it can be seen at this stage that we are studying something which is general as well as particular; which is dialectical, in fact.

Heartfield has the following to say: "A collective that was not made up of freely willing individuals would be incapable of deliberate decision making."

Through individuals, the workings of society manifest themselves. Through accidental circumstances, the inevitable outlines of necessity and possibility make themselves known.

Through particular individuals the general work of the world is done.

We can consider ourselves fortunate that Marx, Engels, and Lenin appeared when they did, and we can honour them for their work and for their sacrifice. None of this means that they as individuals are more significant than the truths which they revealed, about the movements and changes of people in their masses.

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